

LAE BOTANIC GARDENS BLOOM AGAIN

Words & Photos: Gemma King



Once regarded as one of the most spectacular and diverse botanic gardens in the world, it is true to say that over the past decade Lae's leafy crown has fallen on sad times. That is, until recently. *Gemma King* looks at the history of the iconic gardens and how they are being restored to their former brilliance.

A safe place to walk with dogs



Children enjoy the open space to run around

Having lived in Lae for just under three years, it might seem surprising that I had never visited the Lae National Botanic Gardens until recently. As well as being on every 'Things to Do in Lae' list out there, the 38 hectares of natural lowland rainforest are highly accessible, situated as they are, right in the heart of Lae city on one of its major roads. In fact, you would be hard-pushed not to drive by them at least once a day. But the truth is, very few residents have ever walked through the gates, despite the fame of the gardens and

the knowledge they are home to arguably one of Lae's most recognised pieces of WWII memorabilia - a Royal Australian Air Force DC-3 plane. Managed by the PNG Forest Research Institute, the gardens have become known as a thing of the past. A place that people used to go to, a beautiful spot they used to be able to enjoy with the family. The gardens used to capture a real essence of why Lae was known for many years as The Garden City. So what happened? Kerry King, who has lived with his family since 1971 in Memorial

Avenue - directly opposite the eastern side of the gardens - says that in bygone years, picnics at the gardens for families and friends were a weekly occurrence, while a small swimming pool kept the kids cool after hours of enjoying the children's playground and the many ponds. This was a time when there was no need for a security fence. Kerry's wife Christine had her 30th birthday party in a secluded area of the gardens in 1976. She remembers keen golfers practising their drive, and time spent there with her two sons. "It was always

"The gardens are home to arguably one of Lae's most recognised pieces of WWII memorabilia - a Royal Australian Air Force DC-3 plane"

lovely," she says. Back in the '60s there was a thriving horticultural society in Lae, while Jack Moloney was the curator of parks and gardens and worked with great success to beautify the town. In April 1965, a herbarium



opened in the gardens that was of 'world interest' to botanists. With storage space for 250,000 specimens, it was more advanced than anything in Australia. In his 1998 book, *Golden Gateway: Lae & the Province of Morobe* - which records the town's history from 1928 - author James Sinclair wrote: "Lae was alive with flowers, trees and vivid flowering shrubs". The gardens were not only used for leisure but also research. A team of experts led by Dr Andre

Miller used them as his base to collect and record up to 2000 plant species from around PNG. Rare and prized orchids were housed there as well as exotic tropical flowers. In November 1965, the opening of the Kassam Pass connected the Markham Valley to the Highlands for the first time, sparking major growth in Lae. Unrestricted access to the fertile Highlands meant coffee could travel by road to Lae for export. But along with the huge economic benefits came social

“Lae residents craved a clean outdoor space safe enough to enjoy with friends and visitors”

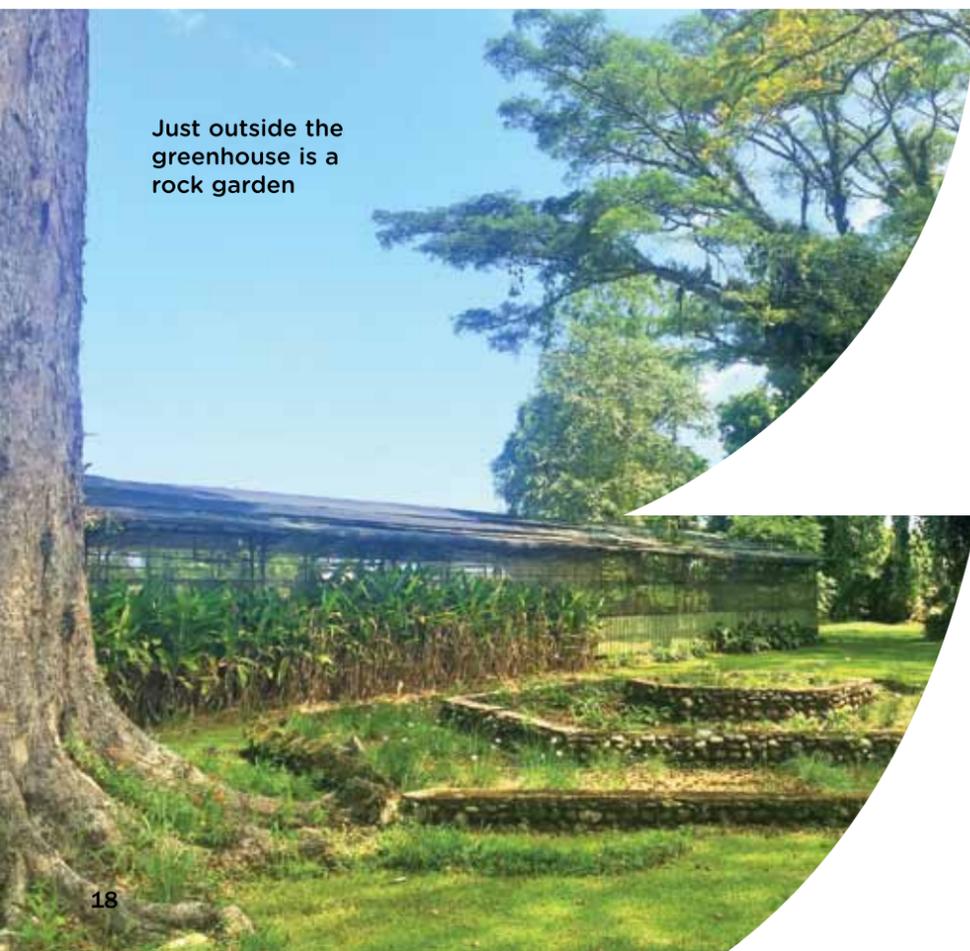
problems that did not exist before. As is the case the world over, the new opportunities and bright lights of the city attracted many youths, who arrived with no land ownership to build homes. They squatted on Lae's outskirts, many without education enough to secure them the work they had expected would be waiting for them in abundance. These youths turned to crime for survival. Lae Botanic Gardens began to suffer as prized orchids and other blooms were regularly stolen. The gardens continued to operate pre and post-Independence but in a much smaller capacity. As one of Lae's longest-residing expats, Kerry King sadly watched the neglect of the gardens to the point where he stopped visiting. "There was nothing left of the place," he says. A lack of public infrastructure coupled with the vandalism and stealing eventually led to their closure in the late 90s. Fast forward to 2014. Lae Chamber of Commerce and the PNG Forest Research Institute formed Friends of the Lae Botanic Gardens - eight

A new carpark makes it easier for visitors to drive to the gardens

people from the government, public and private sectors with a shared interest to reopen, restore and advance the gardens. The formation of the group caused a ripple of delight through the Lae community. Not only did residents want to experience the beauty they had heard so much about, they craved a clean outdoor space safe enough to enjoy with friends and visitors. An advancement program was soon developed, based around three clear goals: to improve infrastructure including the public grounds and security; provide sustainability by introducing procedures that would benefit future generations, and finally; education for national and overseas visitors about some of the country's most diverse and resilient natural habitat to highlight the importance of preserving it. There is also the potential for pharmaceutical research - searching and identifying medicinal benefits that could exist within the gardens' vast variety of tropical flora. The program's coordinator and the gardens' curator Michael Lovave, who has been with the institute for 14 years as a horticulturist, botanist and scientific officer, is passionate about the project. "I like to



Perfect spot for a picnic under the trees



Just outside the greenhouse is a rock garden



Lae Travellers Inn

For comfort and convenience

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central Location Air-Conditioning Tea/Coffee Facilities Restaurant Studio/Hotel Rooms Multi-Channel TV Mini-Fridge 	<p style="text-align: center;">Walk-in rates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Premier Rooms @ K363 * Standard Rooms @ K326 * Twinshare Rooms @ K340 * Budget Rooms @ K200 <p style="text-align: center;">LONG-STAY RATES AVAILABLE</p>
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Restaurant **OPEN** for
Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

OPEN TO PUBLIC

Top Town, Coronation Dr,
next to Coronation College at Vee St



15% DISCOUNT

In-House Laundry

FOR RESERVATIONS
Ph: 479 0411 / 479 0412
Fax: 479 0416
E: manager@lti.com.pg

PIZZA & PASTRIES

Peaches **COMING SOON**

think of it as a realistic version of communities living together, helping each other and caring for each other, and the environment we live in," he says.

Also instrumental in getting the program up and running, as well as building public support for it, is bubbly volunteer community assistant and recent Lae resident Mia Cusack. Although from Melbourne, Mia has been living in Lae since April and in Fiji for the last two-and-a-half years. Before getting involved, Mia admits she didn't have much experience in this area but wanted to give her free time to a community project that helped improve Lae and address its need for a safe leisure destination. Her latest focus is building a website for the gardens that is due to go live this year at www.laebotanicgardens.com

The gardens' 10 paid staff include eight ground workers in charge of general upkeep - clearing overgrown areas, weeding, mowing, rubbish removal and keeping the space clean, tidy and inviting. As a dog owner, keen walker and tropical plant novice, I don't mind a slightly overgrown park - but feeling safe is a priority. That's why it's a relief to see there is now security in place, with eight guards collectively patrolling the office gates, nursery gate and the Milford Haven entry gate. A DC-3 steering committee has also been formed to ensure our most recognised WWII relic gets the love and care it deserves - including correct restoration and documenting of

its history as well as protection from the sometimes extreme Lae weather with a new permanent shelter. But for the program to really work in the long term, Michael says the gardens need local businesses to come on board as its partners. "We need people who can drive the message that we are serious about conserving our environment," he says. "I'm confident that the Lae community will be proud of our gardens again, when they see improved infrastructure, functioning facilities and the beauty that has been there all along." To date, 24 business houses have donated more than K500,000 worth of equipment and in-kind contributions to deliver the first stage of the program. These include a top-of-

the-range Husqvarna ride-on mower from Husqvarna & Farmset - which has made a huge impact on upkeep as it allows the staff to mow the lawns faster. Lae-based contractor Northbuild PNG supplied the materials and manpower to rebuild the existing toilets and washrooms, while Dulux supplied all the paint and some of its own staff to paint them and the existing picnic shelters. Bishops, Boroko Motors, Brian Bell Homecentres, Ela Motors, Farmset, Hila Holdings and KK Kingston equipped workers with tools, uniforms, work hats, safety glasses, boots and equipment - not only helping the boys look the part and feel proud of their roles, but to make sure they work safely. Nestlé came on board with a great initiative that saw 250 staff work in the gardens as part of a Community and Safety Team Building Day. Dekenai Constructions supplied machinery, workers and engineering expertise to grade all the roads within the gardens, create carparks and rebuild the main bridge, including helping with timber removal and drainage. PNG Forest Products provided treated timbers for the bridge and picnic shelters. Laga Industries had 350 staff work over two consecutive weekends to clean the



Staff busy maintaining the gardens

TOP QUALITY STEEL ROOFING BY RMI



RABAU

982 1050
7100 2651

KOKOPO

982 5044
7100 2652

KIMBE

983 5244
7190 0232

KAVIENG

982 1052
7100 2654

BUKA

73882093

PALMALMAL

7100 2653



sales@rmi.com.pg





From left, Dr Martin Golman of the National Forest Research Institute, Lae MP Loujaya Kouza, gardens project manager Sarah W, Tunou Sabuin of the PNG Forest Authority and gardens curator Michael Lovave at the official re-opening in November



Laga Industries staff clean the DC3 plane

DC-3 plane, BBQs and central creek bed, as well as prepare new garden beds for each picnic area. Consort repaired some of the fences to improve security.

The most notable contribution however has come from Swire Shipping, supporters from the beginning. Swire has engaged the award-winning Cairns-based Garden City Design Company to design five internal gardens – heliconias; gingers; food; fibre & health; and medicinal

& foliage. Having already worked on the immaculate Lae War Cemetery, the company is already familiar with the city and intends to create designs that showcase PNG's diverse flora, while adding an educational, recreational and tourist appeal. The gardens will spread throughout the northern section connected with vine arches and new pathways. There is a fun design for a children's maze to go with the existing BSP

Opening hours: Lae Botanic Gardens are open from 9am until 4.30pm seven days a week and during public holidays. Visitors can park at the Milford Haven Rd entrance or near the BSP playground, just past the main gate.

Entry fees: Adults K5, students K2, children (3yrs and above) K1. Bookings required for private parties and events.

Anybody who can help with resource support, machinery hire, equipment, garden materials, building expertise, promotional opportunities or volunteer labour can contact Michael Lovave via email: mlovave@fri.pngfa.gov.pg or phone: +675 4721 041/4188. Visit www.rainylae.com/volunteering for regular updates.

“The momentum must continue because the work is far from over”

playground area. Describing the designs to come, Michael said visitors should expect “a natural wonderland” full of colour, texture and structure. “They will take the visitor on a journey through PNG’s unique and complex environment.” In the leadup to the garden’s official reopening on November 6 – just eight months after the advancement program began – Michael, Mia and project manager Sarah W (surname withheld on request) worked tirelessly to ensure everything was ready. And it was! Lae MP Loujaya Kouza

cut the ribbon before a crowd that included the public, government figures, stakeholders and media, then a mini-feast followed in the form of a bbq lunch from Lae Rotary Club and fresh sandwiches, pies and soft drinks supplied by Andersons Foodland.

When milestones such as this are reached at the hands of volunteers who want to see everyone benefit from their hard work I am reminded why I love being part of the Lae community. As with everything however, the momentum must continue because the work is far from over.▲



CONNECT YOUR REMOTE BUSINESS

No matter where you are, we can connect your business using our reliable VSAT service.



For more information contact us today on:
+675 7373 0000
businesspng@digicelgroup.com

Your complete business service provider.